



## Hospital celebrates renaming of SCI Center

Kamryn Jaroszewski

Years of Michael Bilirakis' hard work and dedication to supporting veterans was recognized April 20 when James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital's Spinal Cord Injury Center was renamed for the retired congressman.

Those attending the ceremony shared the same admiration and respect for Bilirakis and spoke about how deeply proud they were to witness the event.

"What a role model he is for me," said Congressman Gus Bilirakis, who won his father's seat upon his retirement. "He put his nose to the (grindstone) and got the work done. He told me he refused to take credit for his work."

That hard work — 12 years worth — is evident within the halls of the state-of-the-art facility.

Dr. Kevin White, chief of the Michael Bilirakis Department of Veterans Affairs Spinal Cord Injury Center, said as a new member of the Tampa VA team, he asked SCI patients what they thought about the center.

**Congressman Michael Bilirakis speaks to ceremony attendees before a bronze plaque is unveiled during the Spinal Cord Injury Center renaming ceremony April 20.**



photos by Ebby Talebi/Medical Media

**Congressman Michael Bilirakis salutes the crowd as he stands with his wife, Evelyn, and son, Congressman Gus Bilirakis, at the renaming ceremony for the Michael Bilirakis Department of Veterans Affairs Spinal Cord Injury Center April 20. The ceremony honored the retired congressman, who secured funding for the facility.**

"I heard words like 'clean' and 'phenomenal,'" he said. They told me everyone cares about their job."

Also present for the ceremony was JAHVH Director Stephen Lucas. He said Bilirakis' commitment to veterans has always been substantial, and securing funding for the Spinal Cord Injury Center was one of his top priorities.

"It was his determination that led to it being built here and being the finest state-of-the-art center anywhere in the nation," Lucas said.

"Congressman Bilirakis, we honor you today as a man that has always known the significance of the price of freedom, and who has championed the cause to take care of our veterans and injured service members."

# New Web site available for Iraq, Afghanistan vets

## VA.gov

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs has launched its new "Returning Veterans" Web site – [www.oefoif.va.gov](http://www.oefoif.va.gov) – to welcome home veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts with a social, veteran-centric Web site focusing on their needs and questions.

"VA is entering the world of Web 2.0, because that's where this generation of veterans is already com-

municating," said Dr. Gerald M. Cross, VA's Principal Deputy Undersecretary for Health. "We're opening our doors to them virtually to let them know what they can expect when they step through our doors in reality."

The Web site will feature videos, veteran stories, and a blog where veterans are encouraged to post feedback. The site also will restructure the traditional index-of-benefits format found on other VA pages into question-based, categorized and eas-

ily navigated links by topic. This will allow veterans to find benefits of interest easily and discover related benefits as they explore.

"We hope our returning veterans find this site easy and helpful, but also engaging," Cross said. "As the site grows, we will be linking to veterans' blogs and highlighting more of their own stories from their own views. We are their VA, so we are eager to provide a forum for veterans to discuss their lives."

# Plan unveiled for Lifetime Electronic Record for Veterans

## VA.gov

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama, along with VA Secretary Eric Shinseki and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, announced that VA and the Department of Defense have taken the first step in creating a Joint Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record – a comprehensive system allowing the streamlined transition of health care records between DoD and the VA.

Both departments will work together to define and build a system that will ultimately contain administrative and medical information from the day an individual enters military service throughout their military career, and after they leave the military.

Creation of this Joint Virtual Lifetime Record will take the next step to

delivering seamless, high-quality care and serve as a model for the nation.

At the announcement, President Obama said the quality of care veterans receive should never be hindered by budget delays and he had worked with Secretary Shinseki to support advanced funding of veterans medical care to provide a timely and predictable flow of VA health care funding from year to year.

He noted that his proposed budget for VA will:

- Increase funding by \$25 billion above baseline over the next five years.
- Dramatically increase funding for veterans health care.
- Expand eligibility for veterans' health care to more than 500,000

veterans who were previously denied care by 2013.

- Enhance outreach and services related to mental health care and cognitive injuries, including post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, with a focus on access for veterans in rural areas.
- Invest in better technology to deliver services and benefits to veterans with the quality and efficiency they deserve.
- Provide greater benefits to veterans who are medically retired from service.
- Combat homelessness by safeguarding vulnerable veterans.
- Facilitate timely implementation of the comprehensive education benefits that veterans earn through their dedicated military service.

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## Did You Know...?

- The White House has a blog? Check it out at [www.whitehouse.gov/blog](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog).
- As of September 2008, 2.95 million Americans were receiving VA disability compensation?
- Florida has one of the largest populations of women veterans? The state comes in third after California and Texas with 138,342 women veterans.
- In April, General Services Administration, better known as GSA, signed a deal with Facebook? This clears the way for federal agencies like the Veterans Health Administration to use the social networking site as another way to reach out to the Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi veteran population. VHA also has a channel on YouTube.





photo by Kamryn Jaroszewski/Public Affairs

## Magnificent mentor

Left to right: Brian Coe, Kellee Rehg and Francisco Torano, fourth-year University of South Florida medical students, sit with Dr. Joe Lezama, Chief of Medicine. Lezama was chosen as the recipient of the prestigious John Sinnott Clinical Teaching Award, and was also selected to be the guest speaker for the Class of 2009's graduation.

## Patient Safety director chosen as 'Sammie' finalist

### Service to America Medals

Nurses are some of the unsung heroes of our society, performing long hours of back-breaking labor to look after the sick.

Dr. Audrey Nelson

is looking after our nurses, protecting them and other health care providers throughout the nation from disabling workplace injuries related to moving and transferring dependent patients.

A nurse scientist at the James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa, Fla., Nelson began her quest 20 years ago to solve the problem of



**Nelson**

musculoskeletal injuries among nurses. She observed how workers at loading docks relied on equipment for lifting, and she never stopped asking why nurses weren't using mechanical means to move patients.

Nelson's relentless pursuit of a solution to the high rate of nursing injuries has led to a \$200 million nationwide three-year program funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs that is designed to radically change the way nurses handle patients.

The emphasis is on shifting away from manual lifting and pulling to an ergonomics-based approach using mechanical technologies.

In coordination with the American Nurses Association and the National

Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Nelson's efforts also have resulted in a safe patient handling curriculum at 26 of the nation's nursing schools.

"Her observations led her to do research that transformed the way we care for patients. She challenged the prevailing assumptions in a way that was grounded in research, and she won people over to her point of view," said Stephen Lucas, director of the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital.

"Now, because of her tireless dedication to improving care and getting people to work together, we have best practices for moving patients

**See Award, page 6**



photos courtesy of Adaptive Sports and Fitness Program

## A 'fun-ominal' program

**"Big Andy" Andreas Bernt sails down the FlowRider at Adrenalina in the International Mall in Tampa April 30. Veterans with amputations and spinal cord injuries were able to boogie board independently during the outing hosted by the Adaptive Sports and Fitness Program.**



**Above: Davis Celestine, Florida Gulf Coast representative for Paralyzed Veterans of America, paddles his way across Lake Seminole May 2 during the Adaptive Water Ski Clinic and Kayak Float trip. Right: Stephen Bush, national service officer with PVA, makes a wake with an adaptive water ski board. The program's water activities proved popular among veterans and their families.**





# Veteran impressed with camaraderie during competition

**Richard Grunert**

James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital's Spinal Cord Injury Center is a place that provides specialized services for paralyzed veterans with various degrees of impairments.

I had a remarkable experience that few have the privilege to witness – a wheelchair softball exhibition comprised of team members with paraplegia, quadriplegia and amputations. In the playing field were males and females in hospital beds, wheelchairs (power and manual), scooters and gurneys from the inpatient rehab unit.

Each player of the Rays Wheelchair Softball Team looked stunning wearing "Rays" logo baseball caps and uniform jerseys. On-lookers and players totaled about 30, some veterans of the hospital and others community members with disabilities. It was a beautiful day and the game was about to begin.

The first batter had one arm and was paralyzed from the waist down. The ball was pitched and the batter hit the ball to the outfielders. The



**Richard Hinkle attempts a swing under the direction of Jennifer Day, recreation therapist, during a softball game hosted by the Tampa Bay Rays Wheelchair Softball team.**



photos courtesy of Adaptive Sports and Fitness Program

**Ronald Richardson finishes marking home plate April 16 during a softball game hosted by the Tampa Bay Rays Wheelchair Softball team.**

player got to first base in his power wheelchair before the ball did, making him safe. During this play, voices came from everywhere, shouting, "Swing batter swing. You can do it, send the ball to the outfielders. Hit a home run!" The atmosphere of the area was filled with cheers and excitement; it was a happy time.

The next batter was a female paraplegic in a sports chair. The ball was pitched and she hit a grounder to shortstop. The shortstop veteran was on a red, white and blue decorated gurney. He used a net to grab the grounded ball and then threw it to first base; however, the runner was so fast in her sports chair that she made it before the ball.

When she got to first, she did a 360 degree rapid spin. The crowd was going wild. First and second base were loaded and a voice cried out, "Play ball!"

The third batter was a quadriplegic in a power wheelchair that supported and raised him to an up-right position. He was not able to use his arms and hands, so his physical therapist helped him hold the bat. The crowd became silent and tense. The ball was pitched, hit and bounced into center field.

Fortunately for the runner, the out-

fielders had trouble picking up the ball and throwing it to first. The runner finally got his power chair in gear and moved ever so slowly (because of his chair's speed) to first base...he was safe. Loud cheers rocked the area. With bases loaded someone again yelled "Play ball!"

The next batter was a paraplegic with big arms. He hit the ball so hard that it went beyond the outfielders for a home run. The player on third base came in, followed by the female in the sports chair (doing another 360 degree fast spin at home plate) and finally the quadriplegic in the power wheelchair made it home.

Indeed, this softball game was a remarkable experience. I witnessed the joy of high emotional spirits, something we all desire. I observed frightened newcomers being drawn into a happy family of their own kind, proving that it is not about your "disability," yet what you still have the ability to do.

The game was softball, and compassion was the victorious winner.

***(Editor's note: The author is a prior patient at the Michael Bilirakis Department of Veterans Affairs Spinal Cord Injury Center.)***

## Award

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that will keep them safe, and that will keep nurses safe and in the profession longer," he said.

Nurses represent the largest group of healthcare providers in the nation, with about 38 percent reporting back injuries during their career due mainly to transferring, lifting, moving, turning and bathing patients.

Back injuries are a major contributor to the nursing shortage, but for decades the efforts to reduce work-related musculoskeletal injuries in hospitals and nursing homes relied mostly on body mechanics classes or training in lifting techniques that proved to be largely unsuccessful.

Nelson identified the common nursing tasks that contributed most to musculoskeletal injuries, tested ways to either redesign the task or to complete it using mechanical lifts and transfer devices, and led a series of studies and clinical tests funded by the VA.

Her studies developed an approach

that decreased the number and severity of patient handling injuries, lowered worker compensation costs and resulted in increased comfort and dignity for patients.

"There's a lot of pressure on government and our health care system with the shortage of nurses. I wish I could find out how many bodies she has saved, how many nursing careers she has saved," said Tom Waters, the chief of ergonomics research at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

"Dollar-wise, I'm sure that the savings are in the billions when you think about the worker's compensation claims and injuries prevented, and all of the nurses who can remain on the job because of the changes that she has created in their work environment," he said.

Nelson met repeated resistance to moving patients mechanically from selfless nurses and from occupational therapists, rehabilitation specialists and long-term care providers who thought it was undignified.

Hospital administrators said the change would cost too much.

"Initially, people didn't want to

hear about the problem and they just didn't want to see the risk," said Nancy Hughes, director for the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health of the American Nurses Association. "Audrey persisted and she eventually convinced them that they could work together to create win-win situations for the health care providers and the patients."

Nelson said many nurses have what she calls the "Florence Nightingale syndrome" — they will sacrifice themselves for the patient.

"So you have a 125-pound female nurse trying to move a 250-pound male patient using her own body. It's a dangerous situation — for the nurse and the patient," she said. "Now we are hearing that nurses get trained on the equipment in school, and then they expect to have it on the job. They go into their jobs and demand it when it's not available."

Too often, nurses and the hardships they must endure are overlooked and underappreciated. Nurses and health care providers for the VA can feel better knowing Audrey Nelson's got their back.



photos by Kamryn Jaroszewski/Public Affairs



## Caffeine connection

Hospital Director Stephen M. Lucas and Canteen Chief David Fedor cut the ribbon (left) to officially open Starbucks, located inside the main entrance of the hospital. The coffee shop is open from 6:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday and is closed on weekends.



Three cheers for nurses...

# Hip, hip, hooray!



## Quiz Cart Q & A

Above: Mary Hilbert (right) quizzes nurses on the fourth floor during Nurses Week. Hilbert and Terry Lonczak (not pictured) made their rounds with the Quiz Cart so nurses could enter their names in a drawing for one of 14 prizes. Every year, Nurses Week begins May 6 and culminates May 12, which is the birthday of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing. This year's theme is *Nurses: Building a Healthy America*. Several activities were planned in the hospital, including a "tea social" in honor of Sandra Janzen, Associate Director of Patient Care and Nursing Service, who was inducted into the American Academy of Nursing.



photos by Kamryn Jaroszewski/Public Affairs

## Haley nurse receives Secretary's excellence award

Kamryn Jaroszewski

Women's Program Director Peggy Mikelonis was chosen as a recipient of the 2009 Secretary of Veterans Affairs' Award for Excellence in Nursing.

Mikelonis is a fierce champion for women veterans. Some of her many accomplishments include:

- Partnering with the Veterans'



**Mikelonis**

Homeless Program's Grant and Per Diem coordinator to establish the Athena House, a community house for homeless women veterans,

- Incorporating mental health services in the Women Veterans Comprehensive Health Center long before it was a national trend, and
  - Advocated for obtaining the first bone-densitometry machine at JAHVH and worked with Radiology Service in procuring additional mammography equipment for JAHVH and large outpatient clinics.
- She is currently working as the

Lead Women Veterans Program Manager for VISN 8. In the nomination letter, Lucille Raia, associate chief of Nursing Service, wrote, "It is my privilege to nominate Ms. Mikelonis for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs' Award for Excellence in Nursing."

"The quality and growth of JAHVH's WVCHC and her undeniable influence on regional and national strides in women's healthcare are a testament to her long-term efforts and passionate commitment to this special patient population."

## Laudable Letters

Dear Mr. Lucas,

I have been in the VA system since 1989 (first in the Boston area and now I am full-time in Florida as a resident). During that time, I have had contact with literally hundreds of various caregivers.

As a result, I feel very qualified to give a fair and impartial judgment on the type of treatment I receive from a particular caregiver.

On March 11, 2009, I had a consultation and follow-up on a recent endoscopy in the special clinics with a physician assistant named Michael Baker.

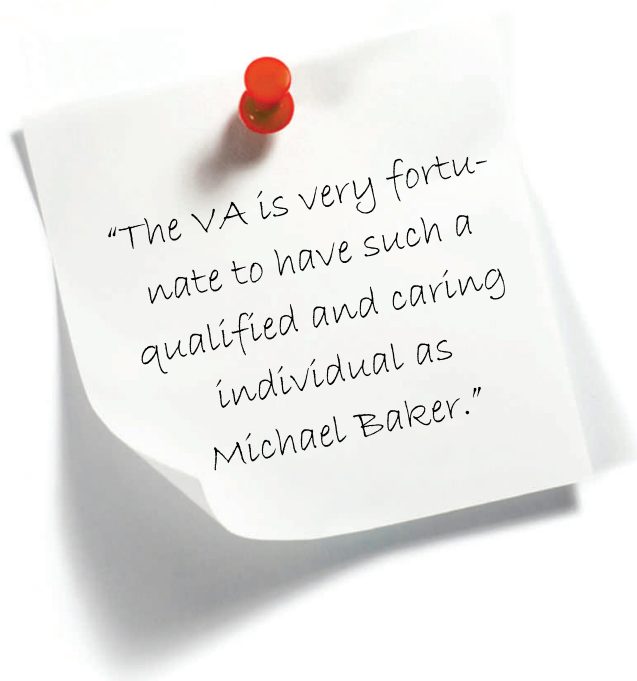
It was one of the most satisfying experiences I ever had with a GI doctor (and it was always with a doctor not a PA). He was very courteous and treated me like another human being.

He explained everything medically so that I, as a layman, could understand. He was not the first provider I had seen in the GI Clinic so I was able to make a fair judgment based on these experiences.

The VA is very fortunate to have such a qualified and caring individual as Michael Baker. I have nothing but praise, for the most part, for the VA medical system since I first started.

I have another follow-up appointment this coming September in the GI Clinic. I hope that Michael is still here and that I will be able to see him.

Sincerely,  
J.M.



The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20420



"The care she provided is a credit  
to her profession and the  
Veterans Administration."

Dear Mr. Eric Shinseki,

Recently, my husband had several medical issues that required multiple urgent medical care visits to the VA Health Facility in Brooksville, Florida. During these trying times we were assisted in an outstanding manner by Ms. Robin Mariani, my husband's primary care person.

I phoned in the morning and my husband saw Ms. Mariani within hours. The care she provided is a credit to her profession and the Veterans Administration. She has a caring professional attitude and is willing to go above and beyond the call of duty. She arranged for him to obtain medical equipment in a timely and efficient manner. I am totally impressed with Ms. Mariani, as with the sick call system.

Sincerely,  
LM.